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On Translating Burns: A Heavenly Paradise and Two Versions of "A Red, Red, Rose"

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On Translating Burns: A Heavenly Paradise and Two Versions of “A Red, Red, Rose”

Marco Fazzini

When, on a special invitation from my patron and friend G. Ross Roy, I visited the University of South Carolina for several weeks in summer 1997, I was working mainly on the translation of Hugh MacDiarmid's *On a Raised Beach* and some of his shorter lyrics in Scots, for a book which came out in Italy in 2000. Yet it was Ross's enthusiasm for Robert Burns and all his achievements which attracted my curiosity and moved me on more than one occasion.

I remember that one hot July morning Ross teasingly played the part of a detective story's weaver, waking me up quite early and telling me that he would fetch me soon because he had, at his house, some serious stuff to show to me. He obviously did not reveal the secret behind that mysterious invitation, yet I suspected that the reward for that trip would be enormous. Once in his house, I was told that a special clerk from the bank would arrive soon, with a substantial box which I would be allowed to peep into. And so it was.

That morning I had the opportunity to read some of the most moving original letters by Robert Burns, especially the ones in which love was protagonist, with some suspected traces of tears shed on the sheets of paper, here and there within his handwriting convolutions. I obviously wondered, and asked on several different occasions, why and how those letters crossed the ocean and landed in South Carolina,

getting larger and larger pieces of the whole story, little by little, through the voice of Ross himself.

More than once we sat at a table, sipping Amarone sometimes, planning not only my book on MacDiarmid but one on Burns as well. The Burns one proved to be more than complicated, a real challenge for a translator of poetry. I was fascinated at that time, and I still am, by the rhythms and the story of “Tam o’ Shanter,” yet it was the songs, and the love songs especially, that I liked best, remembering not only the talks I shared with Ross but also all the Jean Redpath recordings which Valerie Gillies had played to me some years before in Edinburgh.

So, in July 2002, as my contribution to the celebration in Edinburgh when Ross’s achievements were recognized with an honorary degree, I decided to publish a little book with three Burns songs translated into Italian. It was Burns’s stanza constructions and his rhymes which I wanted to reproduce most, yet my translations from “Of A’ the Airts” and “John Anderson My Jo” turned out to be more literary and formal than the original songs, as was also my first version of “A Red, Red Rose”:

Una rossa rosa rossa

Come una rossa rosa rossa è l’amor mio
Appena sbocciata in giugno;
Come una melodia è l’amor mio
Suonata con dolcezza e armonia. –

Sei così bella e dolce, fanciulla mia,
E sono di te così innamorato
Che sempre t’amerò, cara mia,
Finché i mari non avranno disseccato. –

Finché i mari non avranno disseccato, cara mia,
E le rocce non si scioglieranno al sole:
T’amerò sempre, cara mia,
Intanto che fluiscono le sabbie della vita. –

E allora addio, unico amor mio!

E allora addio, anche se per poco!
E verrò di nuovo, amor mio,
Anche se dovessi fare mille miglia!

Speaking about “song,” James Fenton writes that people often want to know, when the subject of writing for music comes up, whether the music or the text comes first. If the music does indeed come first, then the lyricist had better think of this work as something rather less than poetry, for it is rather too much to expect that words fitted to pre-existent music can amount to much more than a very professional job.

Despite all the truth contained in Fenton’s observation, I have never considered Burns’s lyrics something less than poetry, and I never wanted my translations to be less than ‘Italian’ poetry.

Yet we must admit here that a translator of songs has to face a double challenge: on the one hand, the musicality of the song itself; on the other, the fact that both the melody of the tune and the lyrics are supplied to him or her by the original country or original author. How can he or she be faithful to all of these details, and still be producing something which can be accepted by a different kind of audience speaking a different language and sharing a different cultural and musical context? I am aware that, like the translations produced in the nineteen-seventies by Masolino D’Amico or Renato Ferrari, my 2002 translations of the three Burns songs resulted in texts to be read on the page, more than words to be sung or sound waves to be listened to.

At this point, it is necessary to let my readers know that part of my participation in the arts also involves amateur performance, singing and playing, on my guitars, some of the most memorable tunes both from the past and present, though mainly tunes composed by modern and contemporary songwriters. This sometimes involves the translation of some of my favourite songs into Italian to create something fresh for my friendly audiences, who can, at least in part, catch some new resonances in my versions of Hamish Henderson, Van Morrison, Terry Callier, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.

Yet, for a translator of songs, Burns was and still is a real giant to be defeated: all the monosyllables contained in his songs are a challenge to any translator, and especially to an Italian one, and his lyrics are challenging also because of his tight rhythms contained in that incredible economy of words. The only singable result I have managed so far is, again, *A Red Red Rose*, in this version that was first presented in May 2008, at a seminar on translation I gave for a master class at the University of Pisa. This is, obviously, and again, dedicated to my friend Ross, and I am sure other versions or singable translations will come, hopefully in the near future:

Una rossa rosa rossa

Rosa rossa è l'amor mio
Appena uscita in giugno
L'amor mio è una melodia
Dolce e in armonia

Sei così bella cara mia
E io tanto perso in te
Che t'amerò per sempre amor
Finché s'asciuga il mar.

Finché s'asciuga il mare amor
E fondono le rocce
T'amerò per sempre cara mia
Pur se la vita scorre via

E allora addio, solo amor mio,
E allora addio ma per poco,
E verrò di nuovo amore mio
Dovessi fare mille miglia!

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